

Death

Let it be thy guide through Life

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I do not wish to be deemed paradoxical if I said that death, or more precisely awareness of death, guards life and provides in turn a ceaseless source of inspiration. It is with this awareness that Buddhism waxes eloquent while it is on the theme of death [*maraṇānussati* or contemplation on death.]. It is by no means to be misunderstood as wsinging in the direction of pessimism. Far from it.

Man is born with death in his hands [*maraṇantaṃ hi jīvitam* = Life terminates in death.]. Death of man does not lie in the hands of or is brought about by another, beyond his world of existence. If one is either bound by or is under the command of any other power or person beyond our reckoning regarding the early or late arrival of death, then one has to be continuously supplicating for its deferment. For if one had the choice, there is not the slightest doubt that every one would reject death and opt for life.

Death is real. More real than life [*Addhavaṃ jīvitam dhuvam maraṇaṃ*]. It is part of life and is built into it as part and parcel of the physiological process of living. Death is a characteristic failure of what is called life. We do not need to arbitrarily give an explanation for its occurrence. It makes little sense to keep life in the hands of one and leave death in the hands of another. Well before the space ship to the moon-[shuttle No. 13] failed to make its journey to its destination, the men at NASA knew of the possibility of such an eventuality. Everyone cooperating in the production of these space shuttles were warned about this situation and were called upon to strive towards the elimination of all such possible defects. It is this awareness and anticipation which enabled the men on earth who knew what they were doing to bring back the ailing space ship safely to earth.

It is for a very similar reason that the Buddhist believes that being armed with a good and sound philosophy of death is to win half the battle of life. Forewarned is forearmed. Death's reality and bitterness being what it is, men and women of all ages, at all times and everywhere, who have not been able to adequately forewarn themselves about it, are seen lying paralyzed with shock and grief when it has fatally stung those near and dear to them. On the other hand, with a serious awareness of death and contemplation upon it, one is apprehensive all the time of all the possible eventualities that could befall man between birth and death. One has to be discreet and diligent in action, with no delays and no neglect. Days deeds are done, with no leaning on a morrow. 'Do today what needs to be done today. Who knows whether death comes tomorrow' said the Master [*Ajje ' va kiccaṃ kātabbaṃ ko jaññā maraṇaṃ suve*]. Many a man has been caught on the wrong foot on this.

The Buddhist story of Paṭācārā and her first-born dead infant, with its vibrantly comforting enunciation of the reality of death, as propounded by Paṭācārā herself to the grieving five hundred mothers [*pañcasatā paṭācārā*] who came seeking her for a word of comfort [See Therīgāthā vv. 127 ff.] should be a lesson to all mankind for all times. She says: "These children come to us, from whither we know not. They leave us with no intimation whatsoever to us. While they are with us, we appropriate them as our own. On their departure, we grieve over their loss... As he came, so has he gone. What lamentation could there be?

Yassa maggaṃ na jānāsi āgatassa gatassa vā
taṃ kuto āgataṃ puttaṃ mama putto ' ti rodasi.
yathāgato tathāgato kā tattha paridevanā.

Thig.vv.127-130

The Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā [DhpA. II. 260-275 and DhpA. III. 432 f.], perhaps due to a deviant tradition derived from the Apadāna Pāli, which has also at the same time influenced the Commentarial tradition of the Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā, interchanges these two stories of Paṭācārā and Kisāgotamī and

transfers this story of the dead son to Kisāgotamī, with the very dramatic story of the Buddha asking her to get some mustard seeds from a home where no death had ever occurred. What Kisāgotamī apparently sought from the Buddha was some medication [*bhesajjaṃ*] for the restoration to life of her dead child. But the Buddha, instead of making a blunt refusal to do so and turning away this grieving mother, is said to have wisely used this strategy. It was more profound a lesson to teach and to learn that there never was and never shall be a home in which no death has ever occurred than to perform a miracle through divine power whereby a single mortal son is raised from the dead.

The Therīgāthā makes no mention of any mustard seed story, neither with regard to Kisāgotamī nor Paṭācārā. But the Therīgāthā Commentary to Kisāgotami's verses, quoting the Apadāna [ThigA. p. 181], reveals the origin of this story.

*Tadā ekena sandiṭṭhā upetvābhi Sakkuttamaṃ
avocaṃ dehi bhesajjaṃ puttasañjīvakan ' ti bho.*

*" Na vijjante matā yasmiṃ gehe siddhatthakaṃ tato
āharā " ti jino āha vinayopāya-kovido.*

*Tadā gamitvā Sāvattiṃ na labhiṃ tādisaṃ gharam
kuto siddhatthakaṃ tasmā tato laddhā satim ahaṃ.*

Kuṇapaṃ chaḍḍayitvāna upesiṃ lokanāyakaṃ.

vv. 23-26

Two important items of information emerge from this. 1. This story of the mustard seeds goes back to the Apadāna Pāli as its primary source. 2. This Apadāna tradition also introduces the more or less Mahāyāna idea of *upāya-kauśalya* or magnanimous strategy ascribed to the Buddha, referred to here as *vinayopāya-kovido*.

This self-same Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā makes Paṭācārā play Kisāgotamī's role of being the victim of the sixfold tragedy. But according to the Therīgāthā, it is Kisāgotamī and not Paṭācārā who is the victim of this intense multiple tragedy

of losing her two infant children, her husband, her mother and father and her brother, all on one single occasion. Kisāgotamī in the Therīgāthā speaks of it as the tragedy of her own life. See Therīgāthā vv. 219 -223 where she speaks of the death of her two sons and her husband etc.

*Dve me puttā kālakatā patī ca panthe mato kapaṇikāya
mātā pitā ca bhātā ca dayhanti ekacitakāyaṃ.* v. 219

*Ahaṃ amhi kantasallā ohitabhārā kataṃ me karaṇīyam
Kisāgotamī therī suvimuttacittā imaṃ bhaṇī ' ti.* v. 223

It is also important to note that the above verse 219 of the Therīgāthā [which rightly belongs to Therī Kisāgotamī] appears in a slightly different form in the Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā and attributed to Therī Paṭācārā as

*Ubho puttā kālakatā pante mayhaṃ patī mato
mātā pitā ca bhātā ca ekacitakasmīṃ dayhare.* Dhpa. I. 266

This is the version preserved in the Apadāna [Ap. p. 115] to which our Therīgāthā Commentary seems to be very much indebted.

With or without this confusion in the identification of Paṭācārā [Thig. vv. 112-121 and 127-132] and Kisāgotamī [Thig. vv. 213-223], these two hapless women, together with Vāseṭṭhī [Thig. vv. 133-138], show the world the very blessings of the Buddha's appearance in their midst, although he evidently never lifted a finger to raise their children from death. To them, as well as to all mankind, it was an all-time triumph over death. That is why we have in the wake of Paṭācārā's spiritual gain, as mentioned in the Therīgāthā, a first batch of thirty grieving mothers and after that yet another five hundred, more or less, reach the same heights that Paṭācārā herself reached. These are the lessons with a universal message of which the world has all the time a need to learn.

The pain one suffers in the process of living, one must not expect to deaden

or obliterate by injecting the cocaine of divine intervention. Of this, the Buddha was specific and forthright. The awareness of this gives human life a new and courageous sense of direction, both in the process of living here right now, and in higher aspirations of spiritual uplift.

One must here recollect how the young monk Raṭṭhapāla clarified to King Koravya, the ruler of the land of Kurus [See MN. II. 68], the true Buddhist world-view that man has no refuge, besides himself, to which he can go seeking relief and shelter [*attāṇo loko*]. And also that there is no super -power [*anabhissaro*] who guides and presides over the destiny of man.

Death versus Life

Now let us take a closer look at the concepts of life and death in Buddhism. Taking as an example a long cinematographic film reel which consists of hundreds of single frames, the life of man on earth as known to us could be equated to any one of those frames. Isolating any one of them for a closer scrutiny does not entitle us to forget the rest which have to be legitimately located both before and after it.

Buddhism handles the life of man with this total vision. Proof for the reality of this comes to us not only from the Buddha who is both the Enlightened One and our guide. ' Through countless lives I did roam ' [*Anekajātisaṃsāraṃ sandhāvissaṃ anibbisaṃ*], he says. His disciples who have accepted his teaching, and have lived to perfection the life he has indicated, are themselves capable of assuring us of the truth of this, by telling us of their former births and the experiences there in those existences.

Here is Gotama Thera [Thag. vv. 258-260] who recounts for us his experience in former lives.

In my journeying through *samsāra*
To burning hells I went.

And to the world
 Of hungry ghosts, again and again.
 Among animals who suffer immense pain,
 Many a time was I born in the past.
 I did enjoy life among humans.
 So it was for me in the heavenly worlds.
 I have fully comprehended that
 All existences which are conditioned states
 Are essenceless and are far too turbulent.
 Not for me then are *samsāric* existences.
 Mindfully have I now attained peace.

[Translated by the author.]

Theri Sumedhā is equally eloquent in her utterances in the Therigatha [Thig. vv 454-456]. Thus she says:

They who love to roll on in *samsāra*,
 Seeking birth in the heavenly worlds,
 They know not the truths proclaimed by the Buddha.
 Being in the transient realm of things,
 Even birth amidst the devas is of no worth.
 They are foolish indeed who dread not
 At being born again and again.
 In the four lower states, or in the two above,
 Beings get their births somehow.
 In the lower decadent states, one never gets
 The chance of renouncing the word.

[Translated by the author.]

This stretching of life through time and space is the basic Buddhist doctrine

of *saṃsāra*. The fact that all beings inherit this continuity of life is what the Buddhist texts teach us as *bhava* or becoming. The dynamism of that process is what is implied in the term *saṃsāra: sandhāvati saṃsarati* which is said of the life process of a being in *saṃsāra*, that he runs along or rolls on.

What is connoted by both terms *bhava* and *saṃsāra* can be equated to the length and continuity of the film reel to which we referred above. In *bhava* or *saṃsāra*, the appearance or manifestation of an individual results in *jāti* or birth, and the span of life from birth to death is the equivalent of a single frame of that film reel.

Let us now ask ourselves as to what sets this life process in motion. What determines the very nature of our life here and what pushes us on from one existence to another, to a vastness of incalculable time and space?. Thus the staggering allusion to *saṃsāra* as *anamataḅᅇo ayaḅᅇ bhikkhave saṃsāro: ' O monks, infinitely extensive is this life process called saṃsāra.'* It is primarily *kamma* or our own activities in which we get engaged and involved in the process of living. Such *kamma* is generated through our own weaknesses on account of which we get attracted to or repelled by the world around us. But life certainly is possible without these excesses in either direction.

Heedful of destruction

We must be mindful of our needs which arise in the process of living and be able to satisfy them in socially and individually justifiable and agreeable ways. We must also be mindful not to err on the side of greed which results in being aggressive and anti-social in our acquisitive pursuits. We must at the same time be sensitively aware of possible egoistic eruptions on our part and guard ourselves against pushing our frontiers too far, crushing everybody and everything that comes our way. This is where our human frailty of hatred raises its ugly head, where we determine by ourselves and for ourselves what we like and what we dislike, and thereafter explosively eliminate whatever we suspect to

be standing on our way. A good example of this comes to us from the time of the Buddha where King Pasenadi of Kosala is said to have had his army commander Bandhula Malla assassinated on suspicions that he was plotting against the king. It was no more than a suspicion based on mere wild allegations.

The vicious trails of greed and hatred invariably lead to calamitous reactions like jealousies and rivalries which finally end in brutal murders and assassinations at individual level and in outrageous invasions and devastating wars at collective level.

In relation to this, the Buddhist position is simply this. The Buddhist has to be heedful not only of the external destruction and damage such behaviour causes to others besides himself but also of the internal and psychical deterioration which such violent behaviour sets in motion within himself. This, the Buddhist calls *akusala* or *pāpa*, i.e. evil or sinful behaviour which is self-damaging. Such behaviour is damaging both to life here and life beyond.

The Buddhist's awareness of death is educative. He is made to reckon with the fact that while life in the world, with a multiplicity of pleasure-yielding relationships, is one that one would wish for, at the same time, any single instance of death in that complex, like the sword of Democles, is an immensely painful reality. With this truth staring in the face, the Buddhist must make a more sane and sound reckoning of life. This is the Buddhist search for truth in life.

In the world of motoring we have now evolved to the stage of the over-drive. It makes exciting driving, inspite of dangerous corners and slippery patches. But its break-neck risks are far too many. We need to know our roads and drive with sense and judgement. So it is with life. Let death and awareness of death be thy guide through life.

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